



## **Adoption Day formalizes 12 children's bonds with parents**

**Wednesday, November 26, 2003**

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When he was 10, he ran away from more foster families than he can recall.

When he was 12 he was put into a residential juvenile home, and he didn't know whether the day would come when he would have a real family.

But Tuesday, that day came. Andrew Smith, 16, was officially adopted by Evelyn and Kenneth Smith of Portage and reunited with his three biological siblings, who also were adopted by the couple.

"I'm glad it finally got over," Andrew said before his confirmation hearing at the Family Division of Kalamazoo County Circuit Court. He nodded and smiled broadly when Kalamazoo County Probate Court Judge Patricia Conlon asked him whether it was the happiest day of his life.

Andrew was one of the nearly 250 children who were adopted Tuesday in 35 participating counties as part of Michigan Adoption Day, the first state adoption day, organized by the Michigan Supreme Court and Family Independence Agency.

Locally, 12 children officially became part of new families Tuesday.

"During the holidays, there is a great need for individuals to step up and be adoptive parents," said Felix Sharpe, an FIA representative from Lansing. "Anytime we match a family with a child, it's a milestone for us."

Usually the adoption process takes nine months to one year from filing to completion, said Patrick Anderson, Kalamazoo FIA adoption supervisor.

During fiscal year 2002, 2,833 adoptions were finalized in Michigan, but another 6,400 children remained in FIA foster care, with 4,600 of those having a goal of adoption. About 400 of those children did not have an identified adoptive family.

The typical adoption Tuesday involved younger children, such as 3-year-old Clinton J.R. Neff Jr. and his 5-year-old brother Keagan. Standing at the judge's bench, Clinton had everyone in the courtroom sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" during his adoption confirmation. The boys were adopted by their grandparents, Clinton and Judy Neff of Delton.

What makes Andrew's case unusual is his age, said April Coleman, a Family Independence Agency adoption caseworker. It's very unusual to see a family adopt a child as old as Andrew, and equally unusual for a family adopt all four biological siblings.

"He's been in the system for so long. This is just an awesome family," Coleman said of the Smiths, who also have five biological children ages 12 to 28. "No one can understand where these kids came from and the amount of issues they have."

Ceaira, 11, Aneisha, 13, and Andre, 15, are Andrew's biological siblings, who were all adopted by the Smith family in 2001. Because of complications, Andrew wasn't able to be adopted until this year.

"It was one of our dreams to put these kids together," Evelyn Smith said.

The couple promised the children in 1999 that they would all be together as a family.

Coleman said what makes the case so amazing is the couple's persistence in adopting Andrew.

The couple met him after becoming foster parents to his two sisters, Ceaira and Aneisha, in 1998. They were among his few visitors while he was staying at a residential juvenile home in Mishawaka, Ind. Although they had no claim over Andrew, they became parental figures for him and sought his adoption, Coleman said.

"Other folks didn't have any faith in this young man, but we did," Kenneth Smith said. "We were asked a dozen times, 'Are you sure?' We knew."

Since Andrew moved in with the Smith family about a year-and-a-half ago, he has become more successful academically and played on the junior varsity basketball team last year. He is now a junior at Portage Central High School and is currently working at Meijer as a grocery bagger. Soon he will have his driver's license.

This summer the couple moved into a 6-bedroom home in Portage to accommodate their larger family and ensure that Andrew felt at home. The house includes two recreational rooms: one for the girls and one for the boys.

His biological sister, Aneisha, 13, said she is happy because she knows her older brother will now always be near her.

"When we were taken out of our house, I was hoping I could be together with him," Aneisha said after the confirmation hearing Tuesday that finalized the adoption.

She and her brothers and sisters all raised both hands when Probate Judge Patricia Conlon asked who all was in favor of the adoption. The large blended family includes nine children, two of whom are grown and another seven who live with their parents. In addition to the four adopted children, Andrew's new siblings, Eric, 20, Dirail, 17, and Keondra, 12, attended the hearing Tuesday.

"I'm surrounded by love," he said after the hearing. The best part is "being a Smith and knowing that I'll be taken care of from now on."

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